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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the following controversial issues between colleges and their external stakeholders: defining and measuring student success, developmental education, and accountability. Given a variety of educational goals by individual learners, community colleges need to create a system of multiple measures to define student success. An important new way of measuring student performance is student goal attainment. Furthermore, a redefinition of "completion" would permit colleges to track incremental learning or skill acquisition by acknowledging the completion of "chunks" or modules within programs. The purpose of developmental education is to provide all students with the skills necessary to succeed, regardless of their diverse needs and goals. An expanded yet clearly defined role for developmental education can help make the promise of open access to higher education a reality and strengthen the U.S. workforce of tomorrow. A simple set of reliable and valid indicators centered around student goal attainment needs to be adopted nationally if community colleges are to respond more meaningfully to increasing public expectations to account for their performance. The AACC (American Association of Community Colleges) Core Indicators (1999) provide a valuable resource and could be adopted as a starting point for building local college accountability plans. (JA)

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THE BRECKENRIDGE EXPERIENCE

REFRAMING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT STUDENT SUCCESS

A Discussion Paper

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National Council of Instructional Administrators

Adopted by the NCIA Board of Directors

January, 2000

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Reframing the Conversation about Student Success

Introduction

The National Council of Instructional Administrators (NCIA) is an affiliated council of the American Association of Community Colleges with a membership of over 4500; it is the national voice for instructional administrators. In July of 1999, NCIA sponsored an invitational working colloquium—The Breckenridge Experience—that was designed to bring together key instructional administrators from across the nation to address hard questions and explore meaningful responses which would assist administrators in meeting future challenges on their campuses, but more importantly, which would help other colleagues, state policy makers, and legislators in implementing long-term change.

Inherent in the community college mission is a responsibility to be responsive to the needs of a wide variety of constituencies in the communities that are served. This expectation includes a willingness to address questions of accountability and a readiness to provide programs and services consistent with educational needs. The complexity of the community college mission, however, often results in frustration. When constituents ask what appear to be simple questions and colleges don't have quick answers, the friction that results is often counterproductive. It can become a barrier for colleges as they attempt to serve their communities. By reframing the conversation about student success, it is hoped that proactive and informed discussions will lead to more effective ways of relating to the community, of addressing their questions and concerns, and of informing them better about the role that community colleges play in community vitality.

Particular friction and frustration exist between colleges and their external stakeholders on three key issues: defining and measuring student success, developmental education, and accountability. The purpose of this discussion paper is to address these "hot button" issues or debates since they are of critical importance today and in the future.

- The first section, "Defining and Measuring Student Success," chronicles the myriad forms of student success and explores alternative measures as a means of supplementing the limited mechanisms currently used.

- The second section, "Developmental Education," singled out of the community college mission for special attention, considers the role community colleges can and should have as primary providers of developmental education needed by their communities.

- The third section, "Accountability," addresses the need to improve ways of responding to increasing community expectations to account for both contributions and performance.

While this discussion paper is primarily directed at external audiences (such as policymakers, legislators, business and industry leaders, and other external stakeholders) it is also intended for use by instructional administrators to clarify, generate, or redirect conversations related to these current issues. It is hoped that it can be used by colleagues across the country as a catalyst for discussions on and off campus to reframe our notions about student success.

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Defining and Measuring Student Success

The Issue:

Community colleges need to create a system of multiple measures to define, assess, and report student success in today's community colleges.

The Current Situation:

Demonstrating student success to policymakers is a challenge that faces all community colleges. At least part of this challenge is related to the need for a more contemporary view of what student success means. Today's world is remarkably different. These differences necessitate new ways of defining and measuring student success from the days when community colleges were termed "junior" or "two-year."

The students being served today have changed dramatically. Learners attend community colleges to access a wide variety of options—transfer, workforce development (career preparation and job upgrading), retraining, developmental/preparatory and/or enrichment. The commitment of open access also means that a "typical" community college student can't be described. Each learner brings with him or her a wide array of unique and often complicating needs.

Individual needs bring learners to the community college with a variety of educational goals. Some students articulate clear and singular goals, others multiple goals. Many arrive without a goal or with unrealistic ones. What is common, however, is that community college students tend to be older, carrying serious work and family obligations which encroach on their study time. Their financial circumstances often require that they work either part-time or full-time, also limiting their study time. They accomplish their academic goals in a fragmented manner as time and finances permit. Still others are the first in their families to pursue college-level study, and thus, they have not observed role models to familiarize themselves with the demands of a college education.

The world in which these students live is also a very different place. It is a much more dynamic environment influenced by a global economy, a rapidly advancing technology, and an information explosion. All of these demand higher levels of skill to succeed in an equally dynamic workplace. They also herald the changing nature of work itself. These changes have increased career choices and placed demands on students for more sophisticated skills. With increased career opportunities and skill requirements, students today are much more likely to reassess and adapt their learning goals to the changing realities of the workplace. As a result, learners are defining success in different ways.

In anticipating and responding to these changes, community colleges have undergone major adaptations themselves. The roles faculty play in the institution are more extensive; the old structural divisions are being integrated (student services and instruction); strict discipline boundaries are giving way to interdisciplinary connections; and distinctions between occupational or academic, credit or noncredit, and campus-based or distance-delivered courses and programs are increasingly blurred. The trend is toward "inclusive rather than exclusive" approaches.

Multiple views of completion and success (1) by students themselves, (2) by various groups within the institution, and (3) by communities, the workplace, and lawmakers outside the institution make defining and measuring student success complex, even problematic. For the most part, policymakers continue to use success measures which were established in the 1960s when most community colleges were founded. Earlier definitions of student success provide a useful foundation, but they are not sufficiently comprehensive to accommodate the complexity of today's community college student or today's world. In spite of this complexity and the consequent difficulty of monitoring student success today many community colleges have been attempting to identify a new framework for student success—a mosaic. It is more important than ever that this mosaic be developed. Student success, once defined as "becoming a successful learner," now needs to be linked to multiple outcomes, reflecting the reality of students' lives, the changing nature of the community college, the special interests of the communities served, and the higher demands of the workplace.

The Ideal:

Multiple ways of measuring student performance are needed to present an accurate, fair picture of student success. One of the most important of these is student goal attainment, which broadens the focus from counting "things" (numbers of completers and numbers of degrees or certificates awarded) to examining how many community college learners achieved the goals that they had set either upon entry or during the time spent at the college. This new focus is predicated on an important assumption: a wide variety of student goals is legitimate if a realistic match exists between the student's goal and the college's capability to respond.

Effective data collection procedures, which could track the complex learning journeys of students, are essential to being able to use multiple measures to report more meaningfully on student success. This expectation would require a collaborative institutional approach to monitoring student success as well as extensive consultation with community partners in designing the procedures. The needs and expectations of all parts of the internal/external community can be addressed through the appropriate selection of multiple measures.

A new approach to documenting student progress is also important to a redefinition of student success. Community college students succeed in a variety of ways, many of which are incremental; they rarely can be called "two-year" students. A redefinition of "completion" would permit colleges to track and report on incremental learning or skill acquisition by measuring and acknowledging the completion of "chunks" or modules within programs.

As a starting point, NCIA intends to revisit and revise its 1991 paper, "Promoting Student Success in the Community College," to reflect a new definition of student success and to identify how colleges are experimenting with multiple measures which recognize incremental achievement. At the local level, community colleges need to consider how they can develop and implement a multiple measures approach to monitoring student success on their campuses and then promote this new approach to communities, to legislators, and to other external stakeholders.

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Developmental Education

Bridge to a Productive Workforce

The Issue:

Community colleges need to clarify and reaffirm the critical role that they play in responding to the developmental education needs of a productive workforce.

The Current Situation:

The following anecdotes represent just a few examples from among millions of people who, over the past 30 years, have taken advantage of developmental education as a bridge to higher education and personal success.

Before Esther, a 42-year-old woman, could enter the LPN program that she eventually completed, she needed one remedial course in math. Esther went on to put her two children through college, and has now returned to another community college to get her Associate of Science degree in nursing.

A 1999 B.A. graduate, recently elected student representative to a state university system governing board, is quick to credit his developmental English course as providing him with the foundation for his collegiate success. He is now planning to attend graduate school.

Luisa, now a senior at UC Berkeley, had no specific goals for college or a career in high school and struggled, graduating with the minimum requirements for a diploma. She enrolled in a community college, still without goals and not prepared for college-level courses. After taking several semesters of precollegiate course work in English and math, Luisa discovered that she wanted to become a teacher and transfer became her goal. Her developmental courses prepared her for college level study, helped her to discover a career path, and enabled her to transfer to a prestigious college.

At age 50, an automotive student expresses elation to his department chair because he now has the ability to read a newspaper.

A Mexican-American farm worker completed ESL, developmental and general education courses at a community college. She subsequently earned a law degree and now serves as an appellate judge.

It has taken years for a middle aged, underskilled man to summon up the courage to return to his community college to upgrade his work skills. One of his first experiences is with the

standard placement test administered to all incoming students to determine academic preparedness. One of the first questions on the test that he encounters is: Simplify the following term.

$$\frac{x^{-1} + y^{-1}}{(xy)^{-1}}$$

Does his panic at seeing this question mean that the community college was not for him? No, but some form of math review (developmental education) helped him to achieve his goal.

Despite a continuous record of success, questions about the value of and need for developmental education persist. A careful examination of issues related to developmental education reveals its role in creating access, maintaining quality standards, and providing a bridge to the workforce needs of the 21st century. National data clearly indicate that Americans can benefit both economically and socially from postsecondary education. One of the founding principles of community colleges is the commitment to universal or open access to postsecondary education. Developmental education plays a critical role in honoring this principle. It serves a critical bridge to a productive workforce, to enhanced quality of life, and to access to higher education for many individuals. It permits community colleges to maintain high standards by providing students with the educational assistance they need to meet these standards.

Studies show that over three out of every four students entering community college require developmental education in at least one area. Recent research (1999) by S. Ikenberry, however, indicates that only twenty percent of those needing remediation in reading, writing or math require more than one or two developmental courses. Given these statistics, it seems fair to conclude that developmental education is a realistic necessity to help students succeed in college.

Unfortunately, criticism regarding the need for and value of developmental education is often directed toward one particular segment of community college students: recent high school graduates. More than 20 years of research has, however, demonstrated the necessity and effectiveness of developmental education for these students. Research indicates that retention rates are improved for recent high school graduates who participate in developmental education as these students attain higher levels of achievement than comparable students who do not enroll or who are not placed in developmental courses.

In addition to recent high school graduates, an increasing number of other student groups benefit from developmental education: adults entering and advancing in the workforce; adults returning to college; adults entering college for the first time; new immigrants; and adults taking courses for personal enrichment. Students come to community colleges with diverse needs, backgrounds, and experiences; many require developmental education as their first step. As the nature of the workplace becomes more complex, "perpetual learning" (or lifelong access to higher education) becomes a necessity. Developmental education provides bridges for a variety of perpetual learners. As the earlier anecdotes clearly illustrate, developmental education can make the difference between being under skilled or unskilled and becoming the nurse, the governing board member, the teacher, the literate participant in society, the judge, or the returning adult learner.

The Ideal:

A reformulated understanding of how developmental education insures quality in the classroom and workplace requires a redefinition of developmental education.

> *The purpose of developmental education is to provide all students with the skills necessary to succeed, regardless of their diverse needs, backgrounds, experiences and goals. Developmental education incorporates oral communication, information literacy, computer technology, workplace readiness, and learning to learn as well as the traditional basic academic skills of mathematics, reading and writing.*

Colleges must review their programs, courses and services to ensure they are based on identified student needs, including time, availability, and learning style. Further, broader exploration of innovative delivery strategies is needed to build an appropriately integrated developmental and college-level curricula. Making the promise of open access to higher education a reality through an expanded yet clearly defined role for developmental education is an essential element in creating the U.S. workforce strength of tomorrow.

Accountability

The Issue:

Community colleges must find more effective ways to address increasing public expectations to account for their performance.

The Current Situation:

Community colleges are committed to being accountable to their constituents. Indeed, external examination is welcomed by the community colleges as a way to better inform the public about cost-effectiveness, productivity, and contributions to community vitality. The value that community colleges add to their communities becomes more apparent as they willingly report on their performance. However, when colleges are unable to respond simply and quickly to inquiries, the public often perceives that resistance to accountability exists.

The development of efficient and effective accountability measures is complicated by several factors. First, community colleges have a complex mission which involves open access to an extremely broad variety of education, training and support services to learners of all ages. Some learners come to the community college to pursue a specific goal: for transfer programs or courses to prepare them to enter a four-year institution; for occupational/vocational programs or courses to enter the workforce; for developmental education to prepare for collegiate level study; for updating or upgrading specific skills to remain viable on the job; for retraining to enter new or developing fields; or, for general education to enhance quality of life. Other learners use their community college experience to help form a meaningful goal.

For the different needs and learning goals of these diverse learners, community colleges offer a broad range of programs and courses which vary in length, design, and delivery. Monitoring student success becomes a very complicated matter, but often the externally defined criteria used to judge a community college's success are simplistic. Occasionally they are inappropriate. For instance, community colleges are often asked about rates of certificate and degree completion and transfer readiness. While program completion may be a fair measure of performance at four-year institutions, community college students often do not set such goals for program completion. More likely, community college students plan to use their college education as a bridge to something else; and many change their goals. Students' goal attainment would represent a much more accurate and relevant performance measure, even though this measure is difficult to track and report in a simple manner.

Community colleges also have multiple "masters" to whom they are accountable: federal and state governments and agencies; state boards and/or higher education coordinating bodies; accrediting bodies; regulatory agencies; local boards of trustees; the communities which support them through taxes; business and industry which employ students and graduates; and other constituent groups. Each of these "masters" has requirements, formats, procedures and expectations unique to its needs. These are, unfortunately, generally incompatible with each other. Finding ways to translate information and data to meet the variety of requests is a daunting task.

The Ideal:

A simple set of reliable and valid indicators centered around student goal attainment needs to be adopted nationally if community colleges are to respond more meaningfully to their external constituents. The AACC Core Indicators (1999), which identify measures of effectiveness, provide a valuable resource and could be adopted as a starting point for building local college accountability plans. At the same time, colleges must weigh the cost of obtaining data against the value of the information gained. Often the information obtained is not of sufficient value to justify the expense.

Consistent and reliable data collection procedures as well as increased collaboration and cooperation among colleges and universities than currently exists would be needed to produce accurate, relevant data. A common set of national indicators would, however, give community colleges the opportunity to use local, regional and/or national comparative data to establish valid benchmarks against which their performance could be measured and reported. As a starting point, all community colleges should use the following set of accountability principles to reevaluate their accountability plans. Such a review can prompt discussions about accountability internally—with other administrators, faculty, advisory councils and committees, and boards of trustees—and externally with partners and stakeholders.

Principles of Accountability

The community college mission is driven by the needs of its multiple constituencies to which it is responsive and responsible.

Community colleges are expected to accomplish their stated mission.

Institutional accountability is measured by the degree to which the college mission is achieved.

Community colleges are responsible, in partnership with the agencies to which they are accountable, for clearly defining those performance measures related to the mission.

Community colleges are responsible for establishing appropriate benchmarks related to these performance measures in partnership with the same agencies.

The level of achievement on these measures is, to some degree, limited by available resources and the regulatory environment.

Community colleges are obligated to deploy their resources in an efficient manner.

Next Steps

NCIA intends to follow up on the "Breckenridge Experience" through a number of initiatives. Instructional administrators can also play an instrumental role in reframing the conversation about student success in several ways. The following next steps are proposed.

NCIA will facilitate a national discussion by:

- Distributing this discussion paper to NCIA membership and other colleagues.
- Forwarding the discussion paper to the Board of Directors of AACC and requesting that it be made available to AACC Commissions, Councils and the New Expeditions project.
- Recommending that AACC forward the discussion paper to state governing boards and accrediting agencies.
- Identifying best practices related to defining student success on multiple measures.
- Work toward establishing common data elements to produce meaningful reports of student success.
- Reviewing and updating the 1991 paper, "Promoting Student Success in the Community College."
- Continuing to encourage policy-level commitment to developmental education.
- Proposing the redefinition of developmental education to reflect more appropriately its importance.
- Proposing that AACC facilitate the adoption of the statement of Principles of Accountability contained in the discussion paper.

Instructional administrators can support and assist in the process by:

- Using the discussion paper to initiate proactive informed conversations on student success with their college communities (faculty, other administrators, advisory councils, etc.).

- Infusing the accountability principles cited in this document in ongoing accountability discussions with local governing boards, regional accrediting agencies, state governing boards, and other identified stakeholders.

- Sharing student success models which are based on multiple measures.

- Working toward consistent statewide standards for developmental education through statewide discipline groups.

- Ensuring that funding is sufficient to support developmental services as an institutional priority.

APPENDIX A

The Breckenridge Experience

The work of the Breckenridge Experience began under the theme of "Beyond the Carnegie Unit: Measuring Student Success." The Carnegie Unit, with a long and valuable tradition in higher education, is a key factor in the way in which student success in community colleges has been measured. While there is a need to retain it, the Carnegie Unit's utility has limits given the increasing challenges facing community colleges that result from a rapidly changing external environment and the comprehensive, unique and complex nature of the community college mission itself. Other ways of monitoring and reporting on student success in community colleges would be more effective. Thus, the Breckenridge Experience set out to identify alternative ways of thinking about student success which, in conjunction with the Carnegie Unit, would provide more reliable and relevant monitoring mechanisms which would help in communicating effectively with our various publics.

As a first step in this process, colloquium participants identified three important issues which are fundamental to reframing the conversation about student success:

1. defining and measuring student success,
2. developmental education, and
3. accountability.

These three "hot button" issues were chosen because they are the subject of much discussion and debate within communities across the country today. After isolating the issues, each writing group developed a synthesized statement describing the current situation, then envisioned the ideal—where we need to be in the future—and finally, identified the steps that would lead us toward the ideal.

In presenting the conclusions of the working groups, participants separated the three sections of the discussion paper so that each could be used independently. In the final section of the paper, NCIA proposes next steps believed to be essential in moving toward the ideal on all of these issues. Definitions for key terms used in each section can be found in Appendix B. Breckenridge Experience participants are listed in Appendix C.

APPENDIX B

Key Terms Used In This Discussion Paper

Access: the open door policy of the community college which does not compromise standards of quality but implies the availability of the necessary assistance to succeed.

Accountability: the responsibility that a community college assumes toward sponsors and stakeholders to achieve its mission.

Basic Skills: traditionally defined as reading, writing and mathematics, today they need to be expanded to include information literacy, computer technology, oral proficiency, and other anticipated, essential twenty-first century skills.

Benchmarks: targeted standards of performance

Developmental Education: instruction and services which support college success. Sometimes called remedial, developmental education is a chief mechanism for upholding standards and ensuring quality.

English as a Second Language (ESL): instruction aimed at assisting non-native speakers in acquiring competency with the English language. ESL students may also need basic skills instruction to prepare for college-level course work.

Learning Outcomes: the attitudinal, affective and motivational characteristics necessary for successful learning; readiness to learn.

Multiple Measures: attainment of varied student goals as an indicator of student success in conjunction with traditional measures such as degrees and certificates completed.

Outcomes Assessment: systematic, collaborative institutional approaches to measuring student achievement.

Performance Measures: effective demonstrations of knowledge, attitudes, and skills acquired and applied; proof that targeted learning has occurred.

Perpetual Learning: lifelong, continuous access to higher education, not to be confused with lifelong learning in which the learner stops in and drops out as his or her needs dictate.

Remedial Education: a subset of developmental education that includes re-instruction in reading, writing or mathematics. This term has been too often used in a broader sense to be synonymous with "developmental" education.

Student Goal Attainment: achievement of student expectations that have been realistically established within the context of the community college mission, its programs and services.

APPENDIX C

The Breckenridge Experience

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